

Unit 11: Gender Issues

Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

Be aware of the following

- Reasons for the traditional standing of women within Islam
- Equality of male/female spirituality within Islam
- Women's legal status in the Middle East Muslim world
- Professions many Middle Eastern women engage in
- Women and Middle East political leadership positions
- Reasons for the popularity of Hijab in the Middle East
- Militant fundamentalist practice regarding women's roles
- Progressive Muslim views on roles and status of women
- Changes advocated by selected progressive Islamic women's groups

Identify

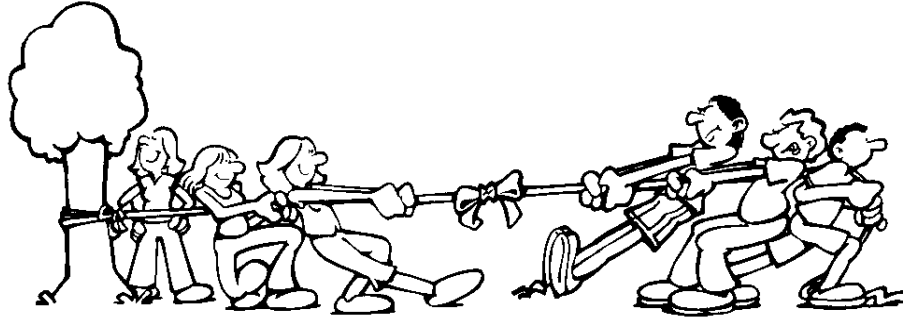
- Chador; Sarawi, Huda
- Taliban, Hamas
- Hadith, Sahria
- Traditional Islamic views of women's roles
- Hijab
- Women's economic position within Islam

Realize

- Diversity of the role and position of women within Islam
- Western media slant on women within Islam
- Complementary male/female roles within many Middle East societies
- Nature of territorial sexuality
- Importance of family honor in Middle East culture

- Historical context of Qur'anic positions on women
- Qur'anic objectives for marriage

Unit 11: Gender Issues



"The West is wrong in believing that women do not enjoy respect in our [Saudi Arabian] society, for it is the very opposite of the truth. In the home, their influence is enormous."

-- General Khaled Bin Sultan, Desert Warrior, p. 55.

"We should also distinguish Islam from the customs of some Islamic states. [An] obvious Western prejudice is to judge the position of women in Islamic society by the extreme cases...Islam is not a monolith and the picture is not simple."

-- Prince of Wales, "Islam and the West."

I. Helpful Perspectives

By far, the greatest Middle East gender issue is the societal position and role of women. Misperceptions abound. Some Western observers see Islamic views on women as restrictive, disrespectful, and promoting sexual inequality. Others admire the modest practice of women (traditional positions of women in the home and society) fostered by many Islamic societies.

To understand Islamic women's issues, five viewpoints help put the subject in perspective.

1. Variety While the Qur'an, hadith, and Sharia give distinct instruction concerning a woman's role and position, there is diversity when implementing this guidance within Middle Eastern circles.

Customs vary concerning women's dress. Some fundamentalist extremists seek to impose strict Islamic social codes requiring head-to-foot shrouds. They would restrict women to the practice of nursing or medicine alone. Progressive women seek reform in restrictive clothing practices, and in economic, education, and decision-making policies.



No single Muslim position on women exists.

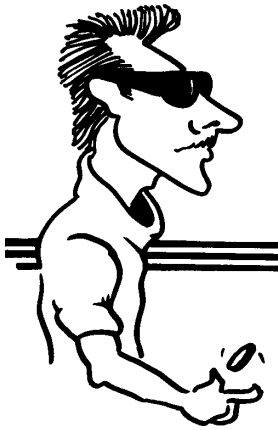
2. Western Media Negativity Our media often portrays Middle Eastern women as victims of Islamic resurgence. Negative treatments of polygamy, divorce by simple repudiation, veil wearing, segregation of the sexes, imprisonment in household tasks, dependence on the husband and lack of legal rights focus most of our media attention. The positive, stability enhancing, personally fulfilling dimensions of the discussion are often overlooked.

3. Complementary Roles

Author Margaret Nydell writes that for most Arabs, women's traditional dress is not seen as repressive, rather it performs a protective role.

Most Arab women feel satisfied that the present social system provides them with security, protection, and respect." (Margaret Nydell, Understanding Arabs, p. 55).

Another dimension of these complementary roles deals with male and female "space." As quoted in Craig Storti's The Art of Crossing Cultures,



"Muslim sexuality is a territorial one...Women in male spaces are considered provocative and offensive. If [a woman] enters [a male space], she is upsetting the male's order and his peace of mind. She is actually committing an act of aggression against him merely by being present where she should not be. If the woman is unveiled, the situation is aggravated." (pp. 66-67.)

4. Assumption of Male/Female Emotional and Physical Differences

Most interpreters of the Qur'an accept the notion of radical, distinct emotional as well as physical differences between the sexes. Dr. Gamal Badawi's The Status of Woman in Islam interprets the Qur'an (Sura 2:228) as follows:

"And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them, and men are a degree above them." (Sura 2:2)...This refers to that natural difference between the sexes which entitles the weaker sex to protection. It implies no superiority or advantage before the law..." (pp. 17-18.)

Concerning divorce, Dr. Badawi also observes, "To provide for the stability of the family, however, and in order to protect it from hasty decisions under temporary emotional stress, certain steps and waiting periods should be observed by men and women seeking divorce. Considering the relatively more emotional nature of women, a good reason for asking for divorce should be brought before the judge." (p. 19.)

5. Family Honor

"The maintenance of family honor is one of the highest values in Arab society.



Since misbehavior by women can do more damage to family honor than misbehavior by men, clearly defined patterns of behavior have been developed to protect women and help them avoid situations which may give rise to false impressions or unfounded gossip. (Nydell, p. 51.)

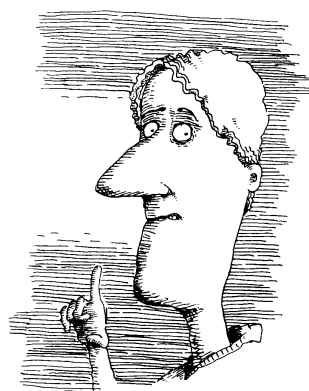
Stated another way, the "sexual behavior and reputation of the women of a lineage were the most important components of a family's honor. A bad reputation for one woman meant a bad reputation for the whole lineage. Honor was essential to social life; without it even minimal social standing in the community was impossible. Men were especially interested in maintaining honor. Women were always on their best behavior around men from other families because they were afraid of getting a bad reputation. A bad reputation could disgrace the men of her family. A disgraced husband could restore his status, however, through divorce. Most disgraced fathers and brothers in rural and lower-class urban families, however, believed that honor could only be restored by killing

the daughter or sister suspected of sexual misconduct. Family members who murdered the women were prepared to accept legal penalties for their actions." (Egypt, A Country Study, p. 128).

Three treatments of Islamic women's rights--the traditional, fundamentalist, and progressive--assist our understanding.

II. Traditional Views of the Standing of Women

The Status of Woman in Islam, a pamphlet by Dr. Gamal A. Badawi, published by The Muslim Students Association of the United States and Canada, outlines conventional perspectives on Islam's treatment of women. Dr. Badawi's perspective is instrumental in understanding traditional women's roles. His views seem to accurately portray traditional Muslim positions.

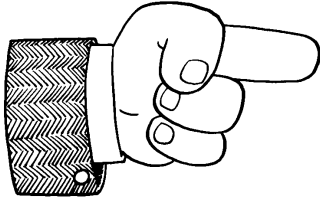


This section draws heavily on Dr. Badawi's work in looking at the following themes: the historical context; Qur'an, hadith and Sharia approaches to women's spiritual equality, and the position in the home, economic life, and women's political involvement. In addition, this portion states the variety of perspectives on hijab, the distinctive shawl head covering used by many Middle East women.

1. The Historical Context Given the dismal status of women in seventh century Middle East society, Islam did much to restore dignity and individual rights.

"In the midst of the darkness that engulfed the world, the divine revelation echoed in the wide desert of Arabia with a fresh, noble, and universal message to humanity: 'O Mankind, keep your duty to your Lord who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate (of same kind) and from them twain has spread a multitude of men and women.'" (Sura 4:1, Badawi, p. 11.)

In stating that God created woman from the same single soul as man, the Qur'an outlines an equality of origin. This elevated the woman's position, compared to that held by many in seventh century Meccan society.



"Remember...that Muslim countries like Turkey, Egypt and Syria gave women the vote as early as Europe did its women..."

The rights of Muslim women to property and inheritance, to protection if divorced and to the conducting of business, were rights prescribed by the Qur'an 1400 years ago, even if they were not everywhere translated into practice." (Prince of Wales, "Islam and the West".)

2. Spiritual Equality Before God, men and women are on equal footing.

"The Prophet said, 'All people are equal, as equal as the teeth of a comb. An Arab is no better than a non-Arab, nor is a white person over a black person, nor is a male superior to the female. The only people who enjoy preference with God are the devout.'" (Hadith as quoted in Marston Speight, God is One, p. 50.)

The Qur'an supports this spiritual equality. "Every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds"... "Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily to him will We give a new life that is good and pure, and We will bestow on such their reward according to their actions." (Sura's 74:38; 16:97.)

3. Social Position in the Home *"The Qur'an clearly indicates that marriage is a sharing between the two halves of the society, and that its objectives, beside perpetuating human life, are emotional well-being and spiritual harmony."*

Its bases are love and mercy...'And among His signs is this: That He created mates for you from yourselves that you may find rest, peace of mind in them, and He ordained between you love and mercy. Lo, herein indeed are signs for people who reflect.'"
(Sura 30:21, Badawi, p. 16.)



Equality seems to apply to all areas except leadership. "The rules for married life in Islam are clear and in harmony with upright human nature. In consideration of the physiological and psychological make-up of man and woman, both have equal rights and claims on one another, except for one responsibility, that of leadership. This is a matter which is natural in any collective life and which is consistent with the nature of man.

The Qur'an thus states: 'And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them, and men are a degree above them.' (Sura 2:228)

...man's role of leadership in relation to his family does not mean the husband's dictatorship over his wife. Islam emphasizes the importance of taking counsel and mutual agreement in family decisions... Prophet Muhammad (P) said: The best of you is the best to his family and I am the best among you to my family." (Badawi, p. 17.)

4. Economic Position "According to Islamic Law, woman's right to her money, real estate, or other properties is fully acknowledged. This right undergoes no change whether she is single or married...

With regard to the woman's right to seek employment...Islam regards her role in society as a mother and a wife as the most sacred and essential one. Neither maids nor baby-sitters can possibly take the mother's place as the educator of upright, complex-free, and carefully-reared children. Such a noble and vital role, which largely shapes the future of nations, cannot be regarded as 'idleness.'



...there is no decree in Islam which forbids a woman from seeking employment whenever there is a necessity for it, especially in positions which fit her nature and in which society needs her most. Examples of these professions are nursing, teaching (especially for children), and medicine. Moreover, there is no restriction on benefiting from woman's exceptional talent in any field. Even for the position of a judge...we find early Muslim scholars...holding there is nothing wrong with it." (Badawi, p. 22.)

5. Political Dimensions Political involvement--election, nomination to political office, participation in public affairs--in some Islamic circles is not limited to men alone. Within the Middle East however, most women are ineligible to become heads of state. The hadith, "A people will not prosper if they let a woman be their leader," as interpreted by Dr. Badawi, infers "the natural differences in the biological and psychological make-up of men and women" have "nothing to do with the dignity of woman or with her rights...

According to Islam, the head of state is no mere figurehead...This demanding position...is generally inconsistent with the physiological and psychological makeup of woman in general...Even in modern times, and in the most developed countries, it is rare to find a woman in the position of a head of state acting as more than a figurehead, a woman commander of the armed services, or even a proportionate number of women representatives in parliaments, or similar bodies...It is...logical to explain the present situation in terms of the natural and indisputable differences between man

and woman, a difference which does not imply any 'supremacy' of one over the other. The difference implies rather the 'complementary' roles of both the sexes in life." (Badawi, p. 25.)

6. Hijab (HEHZH-yahb) Analysts often interpret the growing, widespread popularity of hijab as indicating a rise of traditionalist Islam.

Judith Miller, in describing the difficulty of assessing the depth of what some depict as the growing Islamic fervor, outlines the following reasons for a woman's use of traditional dress:



a. Expense Cost of cosmetics and trips to hairdressers is greatly reduced by wearing the traditional garb.

b. Psychological distance In crowded living conditions, hijab maintains a safe haven--even in the midst of congested conditions.

c. Safety Traditional dress says "This is a devout woman. Leave her alone."

d. Mobility In conservative cultures, the chador (woman's shawl) allows a woman to venture outside the confines of her home.

e. Fashion For some women, wearing hijab is a statement of fashion and generational rebellion. (See God Has Ninety-Nine Names, pp. 469, 470.)

III. Fundamentalist Outlooks



In Afghanistan, recent imposition of strict Sharia ruling bars most women from working outside the home or going to school. Taliban clerics and militia seek to reestablish medieval guidelines within this war-torn country. Perceived discrimination against women is the result.

On 7 Oct 1996, the United Nations formally objected to this extreme treatment, warning that foreign aid programs may be disrupted unless change incurs.

IV. Progressive Views

One of this century's first progressive women was Egypt's Huda Sarawi. In 1923, she threw her veil into the Mediterranean, becoming one of the first women to become unveiled.

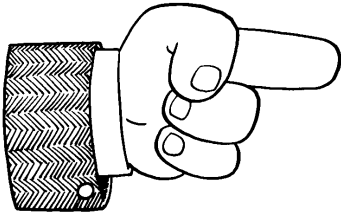


In response, her husband quickly divorced her. In time, she founded the Egyptian Feminist Union, which promoted nationalism, education for women, and an outlawing of the veil.

Today, a broad based woman's group, the "Sisters in Islam," advocates laws against domestic violence. They promote Qur'an interpretation by women textual critics.

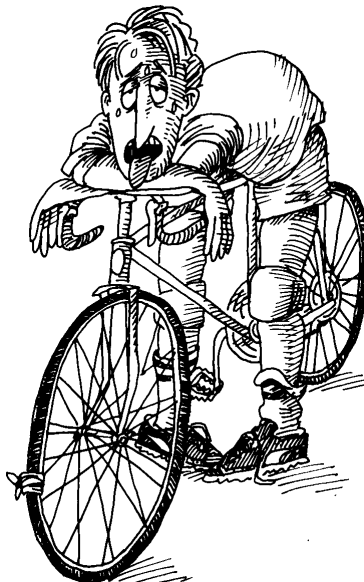
Iran's Simin Behbahani--mother, housewife, and high school teacher for twenty-nine years--also is a progressive author. Her works, in addition to being instructive and entertaining, seek radical change. She calls into question traditional, gender-bound, women's identities.

Across North Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, advocates of Muslim women's rights seek equality in education, property rights, and business opportunities.



"They also want reform in Muslim family laws that often leaves them at the mercy of men who can divorce them without warning, take away their children, deny them the right to travel and bequeath them as chattel to the next male relative."

(See Barbara Crossette, "Women's Rights Gaining Attention Within Islam," New York Times, 12 May 1996, p. A3.)



"Stay committed."

Vocabulary List: Gender Issues

Chador (chah-DUHR) The woman's shawl (head covering) used by many Middle Eastern women

Complementary roles Traditional outlook which sees man as protector, and women enjoying the fruits of this guardianship in the security, protection, and respect given them in the home.

Fundamentalist positions of Islamic women Advocates who apply strict interpretations of the Qur'an and sharia to women. Many bar women from working outside the home or attending higher educational institutions.

Hadith (hah DEETH) Reports of what Muhammad, or his companions, said and did. Next to the Qur'an, hadith is the most important source of Muslim instruction.

Hamas (ha-MAHS) Movement for Islamic Resistance located in Palestine. This group advocates jihad on Israel. An Islamic state in Palestine is the goal.

Hijab (HEHZH-yab) The complete head and body covering style of dress employed by many Middle Eastern women

Honor: Chastity, purity, respect, and high regard given to individuals and families by others. Maintaining family honor is one of the highest values in Arab society.

Progressive Islamic positions regarding women Muslims who work for full women's legal and religious rights. The "Sisters of Islam" is one such movement within Islam. Members advocate laws against domestic violence and Qur'an interpretations formulated by women theologians.

Sarawi, Huda (hoo-DAH sah-RAH-wee) One of Egypt's first progressive women. In 1923, she threw her veil into the Mediterranean. Eventually, Sarawi founded the Egyptian Feminist Union.

Sharia (sha REE ah) The religious law of Islam. Sharia can vary from state to state and within various Muslim movements.

Taliban (tahl-ee-BAHN) Militant Islamist student youth movement in Afghanistan which currently rules 70 percent of the country.

Territorial sexuality Sex role outlook where allocations of "space" mark the areas where each sex has freedom, influence, and authority. In some Middle Eastern countries, men's "space" is in the public arena--especially in urban locations. A woman's "space" is within the home.

Traditional Islamic views of the woman's position While spiritually equal, women are barred from leadership positions outside the home. Their sphere of influence, and grounds for respect, stem from the position taken within the home and family.

Woman's economic position within Islam The Qur'an guarantees property, inheritance, and monetary rights to women, whether single or married. In practice, these rights are often percentages less than those given their male counterparts.

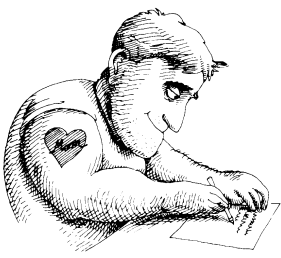
Review Quiz: Gender Issues



Part 1--Matching

Place the correct letter in the blank provided.

- | | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| 1. _____ Hamas | A. The woman's shawl (head covering) used by many Middle Eastern women. |
| 2. _____ Taliban | B. Reports of what Muhammad, or his companions, said and did. Next to the Qur'an, it is the most important source of Muslim instruction. |
| 3. _____ Hadith | C. Movement for Islamic Resistance located in Palestine. This group advocates jihad on Israel. An Islamic state in Palestine is the goal. |
| 4. _____ Sharia | D. One of Egypt's first progressive women. In 1923, she threw her veil into the Mediterranean. Eventually, she founded the Egyptian Feminist Union. |
| 5. _____ Sarawi, Huda | E. The religious law of Islam. It can vary from state to state and within various Muslim movements. |
| 6. _____ Women's economic position | F. Militant Islamist student youth movement in Afghanistan which currently rules 70 percent of the country. |
| 7. _____ Chador | G. The Qur'an guarantees property, inheritance, and monetary rights to women, whether single or married. In practice, these rights are often percentages less than those given their male counterparts. |



Part 2--True or False

Place a T or an F in the blank provided.

1. _____ Islamic customs and traditions regarding women are the same throughout the Middle East.
 2. _____ Some fundamentalist extremists seek a return to head-to-foot shrouds for women.
 3. _____ The Western media often portrays Middle Eastern women as victims of the Islamic resurgence.
 4. _____ Many Arab women feel satisfied with the security, protection, and respect accorded them by the present Middle East social system.
 5. _____ In the Middle East, the veil can signify the invisibility of a woman within the man's territorial space.
 6. _____ Many traditional interpreters of the Qur'an assume male/female psychological, emotional, and physical differences.
 7. _____ Countries like Turkey, Egypt, and Syria gave women the right to vote as early as Europe did its women.
 8. _____ According to many interpreters of the Qur'an, men and women are on equal footing before God.
 9. _____ Within Islam, male leadership in the home means the husband is a dictator over his wife.
 10. _____ Some progressive Islamic women advocate education, economic, and legal reforms concerning the position of women within Middle Eastern society.
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Part 3--Multiple Choice Place the letter of the most correct response in the blank provided.

1. _____ is one of the highest values in Arab society.
 - A. Manly courage
 - B. Family honor
 - C. Motherly love
2. _____ The Qur'an, in advocating spiritual equality of women, _____ their position in seventh century Middle Eastern society.
 - A. lowered
 - B. elevated
 - C. maintained
3. _____ An objective of marriage according to the Qur'an is
 - A. emotional well-being and spiritual harmony.
 - B. fulfillment for all personal ambitions.
 - C. guaranteed individual satisfaction.
4. _____ Professions open to many Middle East Muslim women are
 - A. nursing, education and medicine.
 - B. national political office.
 - C. factory directorates.
5. _____ Within Islam, differences in male/female roles imply
 - A. male supremacy.
 - B. female supremacy.
 - C. complementary roles of both sexes in life.

6. _____ What is NOT a reason for the popularity of Hijab amongst Middle East women?
- A. Psychological and physical protection
 - B. A chic form of generational rebellion
 - C. Fashion consciousness
 - D. Egyptian feminist Huda Sarawi advocated its use.
7. _____ Taliban clerics seek to reestablish _____ guidelines in Afghanistan.
- A. progressive Islamic
 - B. medieval Islamic
 - C. equality of sexes
8. _____ For many Saudi Arabian women, their greatest influence is within the
- A. school.
 - B. marketplace.
 - C. home.
9. _____ The greatest gender issue in the Middle East is
- A. the role and position of women.
 - B. the status given to princes.
 - C. the honor achieved by males.
10. _____ Progressive Middle Eastern women seek
- A. reform in clothing, economic, and education practices.
 - B. a return to rural women's roles.
 - C. to imitate Western feminists.
11. _____ Western media portrayals of Middle Eastern women often overlook
- A. veil wearing and sex segregation.
 - B. male dominance and dependence upon husbands.
 - C. positive, personally fulfilling aspects of women's roles within Islam.
12. _____ Restrictions in Middle East women's roles can offer protection from
- A. stress, indignities, and competitions outside the home.
 - B. personal aspirations to excel in political leadership.
 - C. dominance by overbearing males.

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"Make your mother proud."

